



Health Promotion

FEATURE ARTICLE

Living Healthier and Better Through Health Promotion

Coming home to a celebration of her 65th birthday was a total surprise for Anne—but nothing compared to the surprise that followed. "I remember getting up to thank everyone after polishing off my second slice of birthday cake," she recalls. "Next thing I knew, I was in the hospital, with a doctor telling me I had diabetes. She said my blood sugar got so high that I passed out. I couldn't believe it. Diabetes? I hadn't felt sick or been to the doctor in years."

Anne quickly learned that she could control her diabetes by improving her diet, being more physically active, losing her "middle-age spread," and taking medication. She went home determined not to give in to the disease that had cost her grandfather his leg. Now, 2 years older and 30 pounds lighter, Anne can control her diabetes by eating right, riding her bicycle, and taking frequent, brisk walks. "It's amazing," she says. "In the autumn of my life, I feel like a spring chicken."

Anne's story illustrates that it is never too late to establish a healthier lifestyle, or to reap its benefits. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration on Aging (AoA), diet and physical activity are two of the best weapons older adults can use to be healthier, feel better, and stay independent. That is why the AoA recently launched its *You Can! Steps to Healthier Aging* campaign to help older adults improve their food choices and boost their activity levels.

If you're 60 or older, here are three steps you can take to make sure that your "golden years" are as good as gold.

Step One: Check In For A Checkup

As Anne discovered, you can have a health problem and not feel sick, at least not right away. So if you are 60 or older, and have not been getting routine medical care, getting a checkup should be your first step toward living a longer, healthier life. You will learn what health problems you already have or are likely to develop, and find out any nutrition and exercise tips that might help you. You will also find out which health maintenance strategies—such as routine checkups and flu shots—are right for you.

Step Two: Serve Up Good Nutrition

Eating a healthy balance of nutritious foods is more important than ever in your senior years. Eating the right foods, balancing your calorie intake from foods and beverages with your calories expended, and regular physical activity will help you reach and maintain a healthy weight. Eating right also helps prevent and manage many diseases that affect older people, such as diabetes, osteoporosis, heart disease, and high blood pressure.

Follow any special diet instructions your doctor gives you. If you need help planning meals that meet your nutrition needs, taste great, and suit your lifestyle, do what Anne did: speak with a registered dietitian.

Some older people have trouble consuming the nutritious foods they need to stay healthy and independent. Some have trouble chewing, take medications that prevent them from eating certain foods, or simply do not like to eat alone. Others have physical or financial problems that make it hard to shop for groceries or cook. If you have trouble getting, preparing, or eating a healthy diet, you should know about the AoA's Nutrition Program. Part of the Older Americans Act, this nationwide program for people aged 60 and older provides food and nutrition services that include:

- Meals served at senior centers and other community gathering places.
- Home-delivered "meals on wheels" for homebound persons.
- Nutrition screening, education, and counseling.

Step Three: Keep Moving

People often become less active as they age. But regular physical activity, combined with a good diet, is important throughout your life.

Four kinds of activity are particularly important if you are 60 or older:

- Stretching, to keep your body limber and flexible. You need flexibility for hundreds of everyday motions, from turning your head to tying your shoelaces.
- Balance exercises, to help protect you from potentially dangerous falls.
- Strength (resistance) exercises, to keep your muscles and bones strong.
- Endurance (aerobic) activities that increase your heart and breathing rates for extended periods of time. These activities, such as bicycling, swimming, and brisk walking, help keep your heart, lungs, and circulatory system healthy. They also help you get to and stay at a healthy weight.

If you are not active now, do not try to change everything overnight. Instead, build up gradually to a total of 30 minutes or more of activity every day. Focus on things you already enjoy, like bicycling or dancing, and you will find it easier and more enjoyable to keep up. One of the first ways Anne increased her activity level was bicycling to her weekly book discussion group, instead of taking the bus.

Check with your doctor before you become more physically active if you have a chronic health problem (like heart disease or diabetes), smoke tobacco, are obese, or have a physical limitation. Your doctor can help you work out an exercise program that's safe and enjoyable, and explain how to tell if you are overdoing it.

Staying healthy and vital over age 60 does not require a big investment. Older Americans can do their part by eating well, being physically active, and getting regular checkups. But what they tend to get in return can be priceless: they are healthier, feel better, and have a higher quality of life.

As the Nation celebrates Older Americans Month in May, you can learn more about health promotion and other topics by visiting www.aoa.gov. The theme of Older Americans Month—"Celebrate Long-Term Living!"—highlights the goal of organizations throughout the Aging Network to help older Americans stay healthy and active longer. For information about local resources, contact the Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116, or visit www.eldercare.gov.

